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“Spirit-Led Leaders”

The “Spirit-Led Leadership” training¹ that my wife, Jill, and I conduct in many contexts around the world grows out of my own struggles in ministry and leadership. When I was a young pastor in the United States, I found that serving the Lord was a lot harder than I thought, and that I wasn’t all that I thought I was. I was humbled by my limitations, my weaknesses, and my failures. At the same time, through my many struggles, God kept drawing me closer. I grew in my relationship with Christ, and over time I learned more and more about how to let God work through me in ministry.

At the core of what I’ve learned about effective Christian leadership is the importance of the Holy Spirit. I’ve discovered that the central role of the Holy Spirit is for all Christians of all denominations, not just charismatic groups.

A turning point came for me when I was in graduate school where I was earning a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies in the late 1980’s. My professor was teaching on the Apostle Paul. At one point, he read 2 Corinthians 3:6: “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” He was emphasizing how Paul had learned to base his confidence on God and not on himself or his ability to uphold the Law. The word that jumped out at me in the verse was, “Spirit”.

God used that moment to help me to see what I most needed to change in my life and my ministry. I did not need a better understanding of the Bible alone. Even more important was a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit whereby God would “give life” to me and work through me to give life to others.

We need both Scripture and Spirit, of course. We need Scripture to know who God is, who Christ is, and what to believe. At the same time, we need the Holy Spirit to help us to come alive in our relationship to God and to be able to minister, serve, and lead by the power of God.

From that moment on, while I continued my academic study of the New Testament, I became resolved to learn what it meant to live and lead by the Holy Spirit.

Nine Leadership Practices and Soul Principles

¹ Tim and Jill led a four-day version of this workshop/retreat in Falam, 7-10 October 2013, at Chin Christian Institute of Theology in collaboration with the Association for Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM).

To develop our relationship with God and to learn how to become more Spirit-filled and Spirit-led is a life-long calling, and requires a commitment to seek to grow. But what can you do concretely to learn how to be a more effective Spirit-led leader?

In over two decades as a pastor, a faculty member at Christian colleges and seminaries, and as an organizational leader of a Christian-based ministry to at-risk youth, I learned many practices and principles that have been extremely helpful to me in my own growth. In 2005, I was given the opportunity to publish a list of nine leadership practices and corresponding soul principles in *The Spirit-Led Leader*.²

Leadership practices are activities that one “does” (action to be taken). Principles are biblically based teaching to be “believed”. Both biblical knowledge and Spirit-led action are necessary for effective Spirit-led leadership.

Leadership Practice 1

Envision your leadership flowing out of a deep spiritual life.

Soul Principle 1

Fruitfulness in leadership requires the work of God in and through us (Luke 2:46-49; 4:42-43; 5:15-16; 22:42; John 15:1-13; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; Phil. 2:12-13).

Leadership Practice 2

Actively cultivate your own spiritual life.

Soul Principle 2

Spiritual vitality flows from a real change of heart and mind toward God (Matt. 22:37-39; Col. 1:28-29; 3:17; Rom. 5:5; 8:13-14; 9:21; Phil. 2:5-11; Gal. 5:22-26; Heb. 5:7).

Leadership Practice 3

Develop specific spiritual disciplines.

Soul Principle 3

Disciplines deepen our spiritual life and empower our leadership (2 Pet. 1:3-11).

Leadership Practice 4

Always seek to serve God’s purposes first.

Soul Principle 4

² *The Spirit-Led Leader: Nine Leadership Practices and Soul Principles* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005). The *Spirit-Led Leadership training* courses follow the outline of the book.

Aligning our will with God's is an all-encompassing, ongoing process (Col. 1:9-10; James 1:5-7).

Leadership Practice 5

Create a vital spiritual environment within your workplace.

Soul Principle 5

God works powerfully as we seek his activity among us (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 1 Cor. 12:1-7; 2 Cor. 12:9-10; Gal. 5:16-25; Eph. 4:30-5:12; Phil. 2:1-8).

Leadership Practice 6

Make change a personal priority.

Soul Principle 6

Change is our calling (Mark 10:45; John 3:16; 5:24; Rom. 3:21-24; 5:1-6; 8:5-11; 12:1-2; Phil. 1:6; 2:12; Col. 1:9-12; Titus 2:11-14).

Leadership Practice 7

Lead by listening well.

Soul Principle 7

The Holy Spirit speaks and works through every team member (1 Cor. 12; Phil. 2:3-8).

Leadership Practice 8

Always trust God.

Soul Principle 8

Steadfast trust in God is indispensable to spiritual vitality and leadership (Ps. 23; 42:5-6; 56:3-4; Prov. 3:5-6; Isa. 55:8-9; Jer. 17:28; Rom. 5:3-5; 8:28-39; 12:2; John 14:1; Heb. 6:13-15, 11:1; James 1:5-6; 1 Pet. 1:6-9).

Leadership Practice 9

Open yourself fully to the love and grace of God.

Soul Principle 9

The grace of God creates the only sure foundation for personal transformation and dynamic spiritual leadership (Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Pet. 1:3-6, 8-9; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Tim. 1:11-12; Heb. 4:16; 11:6; Rom. 1:16-17; 8:5-6; Phil. 3:8-12; 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

An Important Step to Take

One of the biggest factors that holds us back from becoming the Spirit-led individuals, friends, and leaders God has called us to be is something called “compartmentalization.” We separate our spiritual life from our marriage, from our parenting, from our leadership, from our relationships with our neighbors, and from other aspects of our life.

A problem arises when we have some compartments that leave God out. We become different people in different contexts, or, we don’t let one aspect of our life influence another. We may be a godly worship leader on Sunday morning and mistreat our wives and children on Sunday night. We may preach a good sermon one day, and lie, cheat or steal another day. We may love our friends and families, but hate our neighbors. Compartmentalization like this is the opposite of the life that Jesus lived and that he taught his disciples to live.

Instead of making compartments and leaving God out of some of them, we are called to fully integrate every aspect of our life. We do this by putting Christ at the center of our lives and by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to let Christ flow into every compartment. When Christ becomes the integrating principle and the Holy Spirit the integrating force of our lives, we will have a consistency that brings the different parts of our life into harmony with each other in ways that fit with God’s will.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul portrays the integrated life in a different way with the same end result. He writes,

For this reason, since the day we heard [of your faith and love], we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9-10)

Thus, the more we mature spiritually, the more we will see the Holy Spirit integrate who we are, what we do, and how we do it.

WHO—the “who” of our calling is to become a person of deep spiritual maturity—filled with love for God and spiritual wisdom and understanding;

WHAT—the “what” is all the good that we do in our lives to serve God; and

HOW—the “how” of our calling is to live and work in such a way that pleases the Lord and is worthy of him.

What is a Spirit-Led Leader?

Spirit-led leaders, then, will put Christ at the center of their lives. They will regularly draw on the Holy Spirit for wisdom, guidance, and power to deepen in their relationship with God and to fulfill their responsibilities. In their leadership roles,

Spirit-led leaders will also invite others into Spirit-led living and Spirit-led leading in ways that build up the whole body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:1-16)

All this is only possible if we are continually nurturing our relationship to Christ through the Spirit. There are no short cuts. To be effective Christian leaders, we must make our relationship with God our first priority, and then learn how to let our ministry flow out of spiritual depth and the Holy Spirit's leading. As Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5, NRSV)